

The Psychology of the Wilmington Riot

This short essay seeks to understand the psychology of the Wilmington Riot through the use of a comparative analysis study done by psychologist Arnold Goldstein. In his book, *The Psychology of Group Aggression*, Goldstein explained theories developed by other experts and brought examples of group aggression from throughout history together in his work. While he did not specifically study the Wilmington riot, many of the theories put forth in Goldstein's are directly applicable to the development of an environment in the city that facilitated the rise of violence on November 10, 1898.¹

Goldstein defined a mob as "a crowd acting under strong emotional conditions that often lead to violence or illegal acts." He further explained that a riot is "an instance of mob violence, with the destruction of property or looting, or violence against people." (105-106) To Goldstein, "mobs are the product of a process of evolution" and they are formed by people sharing the same "conscious or unconscious needs." (108-109)

By his theory, the participants in a riot go through a process of "de-individuation," which he defines as "the process of losing one's sense of individuality or separateness from others and becoming submerged in a group." De-individuation results in the loss of one's "individual responsibility" as well as the creation of a sense of anonymity, particularly from potential punishment for actions. De-individuated group members are characterized by un-inhibited behavior that is generally against the norm of accepted behavior. De-individuation can be facilitated by the inclusion of other factors such as sensory overload and the introduction of drugs or alcohol. (30-33)

Another psychological theory described by Goldstein that is pertinent to the understanding of the Wilmington riot is the concept of "groupthink." Members of the mob were influenced by concepts put forward in this theory. Groupthink is the result of several factors: immense pressure to conform (Democratic Party propaganda tools that made white men feel inadequate if they did not participate in White Government Union and Party activities), self-censorship of dissenting ideas (suppression of previous Populist or Republican ideals), the presence of "mindguards" that divert "controversial information away from the group" (Democratic Party leaders would not permit opposing viewpoints to be seen or heard at rallies or in papers), and apparent unanimity of the group (Democratic leaders focused on areas where everyone agreed --- the importance of the subordination of black presence and re-emergence of white leadership). (32-33)

Another of Goldstein's theories of mob violence stipulates that individuals who participate in a mob do so because of a sense of deprivation – "the belief that others are climbing up the economic ladder while oneself is not, or the belief that one's own earlier economic gains are being lost." He believed that this "sense of blocked opportunity and unjust exclusion from economic gain has been an especially potent specific instigator of

¹ Arnold P. Goldstein, *The Psychology of Group Aggression*, (Sussex, England: John Wiley and Sons, 2002)